



Does CSR Communication Influence Trust?

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Abstract. Trust has been perceived as the basis in developing and maintaining long-term relationship. In business context, trust is an important key factor for business to sustain its relationship with stakeholders especially customers. One of the factors that is found to improve trust is corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. There are numbers of studies that investigate the impact of CSR communication on stakeholders but the mix findings show no establishment of a mechanism to develop trust. Besides that, while the impact of CSR communication has induced much interest among researchers, they usually roam around the tools and the strategies used to communicate CSR information. Reviews on existing literature of the relationship between CSR communication and trust suggests that future study should also look into the role of mediator in establishing the mechanism of trust building through CSR communication.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility · CSR communication · trust

1 Introduction

Academically, scholars have given a considerable huge attention on how the pandemic hit the financial performance of businesses and its implication to the public's trust toward organizations. Despite meaningful results yielded from earlier studies, however, not much can be understood on the mechanism used to regain public trust due to the Covid19 outbreak. One of the strategies implemented is corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs with the intention to re-create awareness on their existence.

Companies continued to stay committed to fulfil corporate social responsibilities to all stakeholders even though the Covid19 outbreak has jeopardized the businesses. Yet, it is unclear whether their CSR efforts are made known to the public at large and brings a significant impact. Considering the purpose of CSR initiatives is to influence the public minds, attitudes and behaviors, failure to communicate this effort will limit its impact.

On the other hand, companies become to realize that the sustainability of their businesses is not merely focused on financial aspects but also stakeholders' trust toward the businesses. In other words, customer's trust is crucial for companies' sustainability as trust will keep customers. It makes gaining and maintaining customer's trust crucial for companies to stay relevant in the business.

2 Literature Review

This section will present reviews on literatures that discussed about CSR communication and trust. It will look at the tools used by companies to communicate their CSR information, factors that play role in ensuring the effectiveness of CSR communication and its relationship with trust.

2.1 CSR Communication

As CSR is growing to be a concern to profitable businesses, scholars have been focusing on another aspect of CSR itself; CSR communication. CSR and CSR communication become inseparable when companies promote their CSR efforts to support CSR-based brand identity and reputation [19, 24]. Stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies are parts of CSR communication process [30]. It refers to communication that is tailored and spread by a corporation related to its CSR initiatives [26, 32]. CSR communication allows stakeholders' expectations to be anticipated by companies and at the same time serve other purposes using different techniques to inform, persuade, engage, defend and advocate [5, 40]. Communication aspect of CSR activities is a prerequisite that leads to other positive outcomes and also a key factor to corporate legitimacy [28]. Besides, the demands for CSR information from the publics makes CSR communication as an essential tool that can help to form favourable public perceptions [52].

2.1.1 CSR Communication Tools and Strategies

CSR communication techniques apply multiple tools but CSR report is one of the most important weapon produced by large corporations [20, 38]. This special type of corporate report usually comes in a form of either printed or digital to present information related to the impact of business activities on economy, society and environment [17].

The tools to communicate about CSR can be categorized into two which known as the deliberative published communication tools and the deliberative unpublished communication tools [46]. These two categories represent the group of public that companies communicate their CSR information to. Different features of different tools can influence the interaction between companies and their targeted stakeholders. For instance, social media is known for its interactivity but the absence of nonverbal messages may disturb the interaction. Thus, companies must strategize their CSR communication with the use appropriate and effective tools when reaching for stakeholders with different characteristics and preferences.

News release is found to be a credible source due to the zero control that companies have on the presentation of that published news [53]. The credibility of CSR information is associated with the company's control on the content. Companies promote their CSR efforts through a publicly accessible tool and that makes social media emerged as one of the channels used to communicate corporate brand [24, 51].

The advantage of utilizing online platform is that both stakeholders or corporations can continue to be present and exchanging information. Social media are the most prominent channels to connect users with companies and to build customer's interest [9, 16].

It is inevitable for companies to be present online when their stakeholders also exist online.

In Malaysia, there is a strong tendency to adopt one-way communication since companies are highly practicing social media to spread CSR-related information [1]. Besides report, CSR winners in Malaysia are evidently using social media for the purpose of sharing CSR information. But, the interaction or dialogue between companies and stakeholders are still invisible. The initiative taken by companies to provide CSR information is not inviting the stakeholders to share their opinions of the companies' good gestures. Companies applied interactive strategies such as forums or Q&A sessions to initiate a dialogue with the publics which may also leads to frequent visits on companies' social media [1].

The above studies discussed about the characteristics and the effectiveness of various tools and channels utilized by companies to communicate their CSR information. Clearly, companies are not just initiating CSR but also communicate about the effort using both traditional and online tools. It also shows that while newsletter remain as a credible source, online tools is significant for its interactivity which help to connect companies and their stakeholders. The use of online tools promotes two-way communication to the stakeholders thus encourages them to voice enquiries, opinions and suggestions [1].

Seven out of ten organizations use the informing strategy instead of interacting strategy [2]. When using informing strategy, the company will act as the sender while the stakeholders are the receivers. Unlike informing strategy, interacting strategy allows two-way communication between stakeholders and companies. They play role as both the sender and receiver because stakeholders who receive the CSR information are expected to feedback. In communication, two-way communication is perceived to be effective as suggested in stakeholder involvement strategy [31]. It is necessary for companies to act and change according to stakeholders' expectations. In this context, companies can improve their CSR to meet stakeholders' expectations based on the stakeholders' feedback they gathered through dialogue.

There are three CSR communication strategies namely stakeholder information, stakeholder response and stakeholder involvement [31]. The stakeholder information strategy ensures that CSR efforts are communicated effectively to build and maintain positive support from the stakeholders. The second strategy - stakeholder response - is based on two-way communication that explains companies are not just providing information but gaining feedback from its stakeholders. The stakeholder involvement strategy entices stakeholders to have a dialogue with the company pertaining to its CSR efforts. The dialogue may involve negotiation and persuasion between two parties who are willing to change. However, stakeholders have different opinion of how companies should communicate their CSR [31].

2.1.2 Effective CSR Communication

The way companies communicate their CSR should at least meet stakeholders' expectations to ensure its effectiveness which in turn will benefit the businesses [24]. Effective CSR communication can develop stakeholders' evaluation of the company and its CSR contributions [23, 24, 32].

Numbers of studies have contributed to the knowledge of CSR communication by recognizing significant factors of effective CSR communication. By sharing about CSR efforts, CSR outcomes and CSR motivations, companies can enhance corporate reputation [15]. They recommend that the effectiveness of CSR communication lies in its message content, message channel and industry- or stakeholders-specific factors. There are several other factors that can influence the effectiveness of CSR communication which include message tone [44], adopting third-party endorsement [33], the relevance of CSR message to or involve stakeholders, and appropriate communication intensity [29, 31].

CSR information that is communicated by third party is more effective in comparison with information communicated by the company [33]. The publics perceived CSR information endorsed by third party as more credible and able to diminish their skepticism [15, 26]. However, reputable organizations are mostly found to prefer controlled channels such as websites, press release and reports [2]. The public expects the companies to practice transparency and deliver basic CSR information using the right message tone [26]. Transparency refers to companies' openness and fair in information sharing activities as perceived by customers [25].

It is originated from the disclosure of corporate information which meant to improve information asymmetry between a company and its stakeholders [13]. In order to apply transparency in CSR disclosure or reporting, it is also necessary to understand the information content, its quality, as well as the channel used to reach targeted public. Being consistent in providing CSR information that is relevant to the stakeholders can positively impact a business [26]. Their studies provide a useful guideline to practitioners of how to effectively communicate about companies' CSR.

2.2 Trust

Trust refers to the confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity [30]. Trust is the feeling that 'those who we relate to will meet our expectations and not hurt us' [8]. It can be developed based on the evaluations of organization's ethics and values [14]. Trust in CSR commitment as belief in companies' reliability to commit to their CSR promises [24].

Several studies conceptualized trust in the context of customer–supplier or seller–buyer relationships [3, 30, 45]. The level of reliability guaranteed by the seller to the buyer is proven to be important in maintaining relationship between the buyer and seller [48]. Trust is crucial to a business because it drives both parties to work at sustaining the relationship and achieve mutual objectives [30]. In customer-brand relationship, trust in the brand is also required. Brand trust refers to customer's confidence toward the brand's reliability and intentions in situations involving risk [10]. Their study that emphasized past experience as the base for brand trust has established Brand Trust Scale (BTS).

Trust has emerged as a key construct [46] as it can affect customer's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour towards retailers [9]. Establishing trust among consumers toward company is found to have positive impacts on company [12] since trust is not only enhancing customer's confidence when making decisions [11] but also an important predictor of loyalty toward brand [21] and customer's intention when purchase products [36].

Having able to build stakeholders' trust equals to building its legitimacy to a corporation and both are crucial to serve its function [7]. When a relationship between consumer and company is based on trust, they believe that actions taken by the company is in the best interests of its customers [25].

Thus, being perceived as trustworthy company is important and so companies should also focus strategies to develop customer's trust.

Among factors that affect customer trust are salesperson, product, service, brand, and physical environment [27]. CSR is one effective approach to develop trust because society's ethical perception of a corporation can create trustworthy relationship [37, 49]. It was also found that many corporations, including airline companies, demonstrate their commitment to the society by initiating CSR programs [35]. Conducting business operations ethically is not just influence the organization's overall image but most importantly, it increases customer trust [21].

The above studies show that customers' trust is important for companies to survive. The trust customers have towards a company of a brand can influence their, perceptions, attitudes and decisions. Positive perceptions and attitudes will produce positive actions which is crucial to keep customers.

2.3 CSR Communication and Trust

Possibly, one way to reap the benefits of CSR initiatives is to make it known to the stakeholders' [54]. Numbers of earlier studies found that effective CSR communication influence stakeholders' CSR knowledge or awareness, trust, engagement and how they perceive a company's reputation [26, 31, 41]. However, to develop trust and accountability, CSR communication should be more than just an 'informing' tool [18]. It is crucial for companies to have strategies when engaging with stakeholders in handling CSR issues with a minimal societal impact [50]. Being transparent, for instance, is one important element for companies' strategic CSR communication that improve stakeholders' trust [22].

Trust in CSR commitment refers to a person's belief in a company's reliability to walk the talk in relation to CSR [24]. Providing useful information on websites can help companies to be perceived as trustworthy [25]. They also suggested that companies should practice transparency in CSR communication if they attempted to prevent customer skepticism. Transparency is imperative as it leads to the enhancement of trust [42]. The more CSR information available, the more likely customers will believe in company's CSR contributions. Companies with high involvement in CSR activities are perceived to be ethical in dealing with stakeholders. CSR can induce positive feelings which eventually leads to trust development and they will likely have positive opinions of the corporation [39].

The above discussion shows that CSR must be communicated before they can induce positive feelings before CSR itself can leave an impact on stakeholders. Stakeholders' trust towards a corporation can be developed and enhanced by establishing a dialogue and is commonly effective if it is initiated by the corporation [6]. Continuous engagement with stakeholders is important to develop trust and support towards companies' CSR efforts [1]. However, stakeholders' trust is also shattered due to the corporation's failure

to deliver their promises. The increased distrust in CSR context is usually a consequence of incomplete information being communicated to the stakeholders [24].

Hence, it is important to pursue an investigation on the relationship between CSR communication and trust. For profitable companies, it is important to understand if CSR communication can benefit them in instilling customer trust towards the business. There is also a possibility that mediator can explain how CSR communication can influence trust among customers.

3 Research Methodology

Since the aims of the proposed study is to explain the causal relationship between CSR communication and trust, it is aligned with positivist approach that suggest a researcher to pay attention on the cause-effect relationship which resulted from a possible causal law in general theory [34].

As quantitative research aims to examine the relationship between an independent variable and another outcome variable in a population [4], a quantitative method is most suitable for the proposed study. The target population refers to the intended group of respondents whose perceptions will be measured to ensure the objectives of a study can be achieved.

Future study that examine the relationship between CSR communication and trust should focus on target segment of one specific industry. It has been argued that perceived CSR among customers should be measured based on actual brand in the real world instead of fiction [43]. Hence, the study should also consider one existing real-brand to help customers interpret the brand's CSR communication. It is important to comprehend that different brand or company will have different ways of communicating its CSR information. Focusing on one brand will also put respondents on the same page because different individual may have different perceptions towards different companies' CSR communication.

4 Potential Contributions

Theoretically, the significance of the proposed study lies in two aspects. First, the study will help to expand CSR communication literature by conceptually define effective CSR communication in the context of specific industry such as airline industry, service industry and oil and gas industry. Since, CSR communication is assumed to be the antecedent of trust in this study, the findings will conceptually define the relationship between CSR communication and trust.

It will also enrich the literature of trust management by determining the role of CSR communication as the antecedent of trust. In most relationships, trust can be developed through communication, but this study specifically focusing on CSR communication and its role in building customer's trust towards a brand.

In corporate communication field, this study will help to validate if CSR communication is another important communication aspect of a corporation in managing relationship by developing trust among customers. This significance of this study lies in its guidance for companies to improve CSR communication by adopting customers' expectations. It

is crucial to tailor CSR communication according to stakeholders' unique characteristics and preferences.

Lastly, this study is significant to re-establish factors of effective CSR communication that Malaysian companies should consider when strategizing their CSR communication. Collectively, if customer's trust towards all organizations can be enhanced by the way they communicate about CSR, it will indirectly help to enhance the global customer's trust towards Malaysian economy.

5 Conclusion

Based on the review on literatures, it shows that CSR communication is growing to be important aspect of CSR. It is a waste for companies to initiate CSR without the presence of information about it and its distribution to all stakeholders. Since it is also proven that the awareness of CSR efforts among stakeholders is the core feature that guarantees the benefit of CSR to businesses, it is also crucial for managers and practitioners to understand the best strategy to develop trust among stakeholders.

Since scholars also argue that CSR communication can also increase distrust, there is a need to further investigate the relationship between CSR communication and trust, especially among customers. Customers is one of the important stakeholders that can influence the sustainability of a business.

This study will help to managers to design the best approach to keep their customers by developing trust. Academically, the same study can help to establish the relationship between CSR communication and trust. Perhaps, future study may also include mediator to validate the relationship.

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Abstract

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